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Frank DeGeorge

Interviewed by
Joseph Vercelli



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Frank DeGeorge

Interviewed by Joseph Vercelli

October 1981

Transcription 1994

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Introduction Remarks on Frank DeGeorge

It was my good fortune to have met Frank DeGeorge in 1954 upon my return to the Italian Swiss Colony Winery at Asti. Frank was a key employee in preparing wines for bottling; in addition, he was the Union Steward for the Teamster's Union who had a labor contract with the Italian Swiss Colony. Frank represented his constituents very well. As a member of the labor-management committee he never lost track that the welfare of the company preceded the demands of the Union.

Frank retired from the Italian Swiss Colony after serving more than forty years. He was very knowledgeable of the history of the area in and around Cloverdale.

Joseph Vercelli

Frank DeGeorge

DeGeorge Winery, Cloverdale

Interviewed by Joseph Vercelli

October 29, 1981

Transcription by Gail Ryan, Healdsburg

March 1994

Joseph Vercelli: Today is Thursday, October 29, 1981 and I am sitting in the kitchen of the home of Frank and Louise DeGeorge. I have to my left Frank DeGeorge, a long time friend.

Frank can you tell me a little bit about your experiences in the wine industry? Can you tell me something about your family, something about your father, when he came over from the old country...

Frank DeGeorge: My father came over from the old country in the early 1890's and settled in Marshall in Marin County, and was in the butcher business over there for many years. Then he went into Petaluma, and from Petaluma he moved to Cloverdale in 1904.

Vercelli: What part of the old country were you referring to Frank?

DeGeorge: He came from LaCarno, Switzerland and my mother was from Penna, Switzerland... in the early 1890's.

Vercelli: How large a family did you have? How many brothers and sisters do you have Frank?

DeGeorge: I had two brothers. They passed away several years ago, one in '58 and one in '73. They were both up in about 70 years of age at that time (of their death).

Vercelli: When your dad moved into Cloverdale in 1904, where did he locate?

DeGeorge: When we moved to Cloverdale, we moved on a ranch about seven miles southeast of Cloverdale, right opposite Asti (and across the Russian River). It was a 250 acre ranch and we had five acres of vineyards. There was nothing else, there wasn't even a house, except for a chicken house, we remodeled that and lived in that for a while. Then we finally built a house.

Vercelli: And where was the winery located?

- DeGeorge: The winery was located right near the house there, right by the vineyard.
- Vercelli: That was on the lower ranch, the ranch across the river from Asti?
- DeGeorge: That's right, that was the only ranch we had, that one ranch there. Formerly we bought the ranch from a party by the name of Cameron. But prior to that it was owned by a Burgess, an uncle of the Burgess' that were up there. That ranch had been divided, we had half and the Burgess' had the other half.
- Vercelli: Did you increase the size of the vineyard at any time? From the five acres to which you made reference?
- DeGeorge: Oh yes, we raised it to about 35 acres. Then we also had five acres of prunes up there.
- Vercelli: Do you have any idea as to what variety of grape your family grew?
- DeGeorge: Mostly Carignane and Zinfandel, those were the only two types that we had at the time.
- Vercelli: When was the winery constructed, do you have any idea?
- DeGeorge: That was constructed in 1906. And we bought the cooperage from another winery down the valley here by the name of Zurzer.
- Vercelli: Do you know anything about the Zurzers? Where they were located, the size of their ranch, and what if any grapes that they grew, or when they started their winery?
- DeGeorge: I don't know, I've never seen any grapes around in that neighborhood there where they had their winery, they must have bought it or what they did. But they didn't stay in the wine business very long, because in 1906 they sold the cooperage to my father. And there is where he started the winery. They had small redwood tanks, about six of them, about a 1000 gallons each and he also had three redwood tanks of 500 gallons each. And those were the tanks that were brought up to the ranch.

Of course in those days, you didn't have all the regulations that you have now. You didn't get no permits, you didn't have to pay taxes, you didn't have to get no license, or anything else, it was wide open. No problem.

Pause

- Vercelli: Frank from what you told me prior to lunch, the Zurzer Winery—you had mentioned it was down from where the current State Department scales are [south of Cloverdale], that would be down close to the French Colony of Icaria?
- DeGeorge: That's right. It was right between the Kelly Road and the scales down there.
- Vercelli: Did you say that there was a remnant of a building there?
- DeGeorge: I think there still is a remnant there now.
- Vercelli: Where did your dad sell the wine that he produced?
- DeGeorge: Well, he sold it mostly in San Francisco. He had dealers down there in the wine business, they bottled it and sold it. He shipped it down there in bulk barrels, puncheons. In those times you had what they called the puncheons, they held about 150 gallons a piece. And he also shipped some wine to Alaska in 50 gallon oak barrels. That's in the early years about 1910 he did that.
- Vercelli: What source of energy did your father have at the winery?
- DeGeorge: We had no electricity, we used a steam engine, it was a steam boiler to sterilize and wash tanks with and to do the chores around there.
- Vercelli: How was the boiler [activated], how did you generate the steam? What did you use for fuel?
- DeGeorge: We used wood. First we had to sweat to make some wood, then we had to put it in the boiler, to make the steam that way. The crusher, crushing the grapes for the wine, it was muscles in your right arm turning the crushers. Finally we rigged up a little Ford motor and then we had a stemmer-crusher and run it by power then. For a long time it was muscles that crushed the grapes.
- Vercelli: What type of a press did you have to get the most yield from your grapes? Do you remember?
- DeGeorge: Yes. The press was the ingenuity of the people there. We didn't have the money to buy large presses and things like that. So the press was made, it had the regular square box to put the pomace in and the platform. Then we used a pine or fir log about forty feet long, about two and a half feet in diameter. We anchored one end of that log into the ground or—the one on the ranch was hooked to an oak tree, that held it down. Then you hoisted it up with block and tackle at the other end, blocked it up and then you let it down, and that way it continued to pressure and you didn't have to stay

there and fool with it anymore. It just did its work without much attention except to pick the wine away as it came out.

Vercelli: Were they any other pieces of machinery such as pumps? Did you have a hand pump or how did you transfer your wine from one tank to another when you did your racking?

DeGeorge: We had a hand pump. We did it all by hand, pulled the pump back. A double-cylinder pump and it pulled it. It was all by hand. There was no machinery in those days.

Vercelli: Did you happen to have a filter, or did you just let your wine age through natural processes?

DeGeorge: Just natural processes, no special things added to it, or anything else, just natural processes. That's where you got the real natural thing.

Vercelli: Your dad operated up until Prohibition—or what was the length of time of operation? As I understand, you operated up until 1919 and then the winery went down during Prohibition and then started anew in 1933 or 34?

DeGeorge: During Prohibition we had the tanks of wine, we held those over for quite a number of years, and finally we disposed of that wine, I don't remember just how that was done. But they sent it out to some firm that was putting it up for medicinal purposes, finally got away with that. [chuckles]

Then after Prohibition we revitalized the winery again.

Vercelli: What year did you revitalize, the first year upon the Repeal of Prohibition which was December the 6th 1933?

DeGeorge: Right after the first year it was revitalized.

Vercelli: Then you would say 1934 you revitalized?

DeGeorge: That's right. Then we kept it agoing until 1942, then I went to work for Italian Swiss Colony and I left the ranch, I got married and came and lived in town and my dad quit the winery. So the last [year of the] winery was 1942.

Vercelli: When did your dad pass away?

DeGeorge: 1947.

Vercelli: Frank, can you tell me about other wineries in the area? Let's take first those of Italian origin, like the Giannecchini brothers. What do you know about the Giannecchini family?

- DeGeorge: The Giannecchini Brothers Winery that was started by Shirley Black. Then in 1919 the Giannecchini brothers bought that place out, and they continued the winery.
- Vercelli: What do you know about Shirley Black? Which one of the Blacks? I know of Hollis Black, how was Shirley Black related, if any, to Hollis Black? And where was his ranch and winery?
- DeGeorge: I think they were cousins, if I recall right. Hollis Black, his dad was Louis Black and Shirley Black was another Black, I'm not sure whether it was George Black or...there were several Blacks there and I didn't get them quite separated.
- Vercelli: Do you know anything more about the Giannecchini Winery? How large was it? And if they started in 1919, what happened to them during Prohibition?
- DeGeorge: The Shirley Black winery was started quite a few years before that, the Giannecchins bought it out then. And then they kept it for quite some time. After Prohibition—they were closed down during Prohibition, then they started up again.
- Vercelli: Ceaser is still alive isn't he?
- DeGeorge: Yes, Ceaser Giannecchini is still alive, he's the only brother left, Carl and Ed passed away.
- Vercelli: This was on River Road in Cloverdale, can you describe their ranch, the size of their ranch?
- DeGeorge: Their ranch was on the end of the River Road before you go up to the Crocker Ranch, it was just beyond them. They had about 150 acres all planted in vineyard and prunes. They had quite a big spread there. Their winery had a capacity of, I would say, 30 or 40 thousand gallons.
- Vercelli: Is there anything else you know about the Giannecchins?
- DeGeorge: They are retired now, Ceaser lives here in town. Pauline Giannecchini, that was Ed's wife, she lives here in town. [Carl] Giannecchini's wife lives in Ukiah.
- Vercelli: Let's go to another Italian name—Andrea Ghiotti. Do you have any recollection of Andrea Ghiotti and the winery that he had here at the south end of town?
- DeGeorge: Andrea Ghiotti had a little winery down here, the building is still standing there, and it is on the property now that is owned by the church. His name was Andrea Ghiotti, but several years after he had started the winery he changed his name to Ghiotti.

- Vercelli: What was his name before he changed it to Ghiotti?
- DeGeorge: Andrea Frigiotti. It was after Prohibition that he changed his name.
- Vercelli: He changed it in '34?
- DeGeorge: Somewhere in there.
- Vercelli: Did that winery operate before Prohibition?
- DeGeorge: The winery operated before Prohibition and I don't think it ran very long after Prohibition.
- Vercelli: Frank, do you know any of the Zanzis that were in the wine business before Prohibition?
- DeGeorge: I know Antonio Zanzi, he had a winery down near Chianti (Station, north of Geyserville, south of Asti, Zanzi Corner), and he operated that for quite some time...
- He operated before [Prohibition] and after also, and I think when they sold the property they operated a little while (after).
- Vercelli: That was at Zanzi Corner south of Asti?
- DeGeorge: That's right.
- Vercelli: Do you know anything about the Biocchi family, where they had a winery?
- DeGeorge: Yes, they had a winery and it was set back in the foothills, right back of the Seghesio property, they had a winery back there.
- Vercelli: Do you have any idea as to time? Was it before or after 1910?
- DeGeorge: I can't recall that, just how long they had that winery there, I know they did have that winery there because I've been in it, it's been years.
- Vercelli: A little earlier in the month you had mentioned something about the Cloverdale Wine Company? Who ran it?
- DeGeorge: I don't know who ran it, but the Cloverdale Wine Company was down here, just a block from here near the railroad tracks. And it ran for a while and Italian Swiss Colony took it over and then they didn't run it for very long and took the cooperage out and used it for a warehouse.

- Vercelli: You also mentioned a Hall as being in the wine business—I remember a Hall that was in the feed business.
- DeGeorge: It was George Hall that was in the wine business. I don't know what his relationship was with the Hall that was in the feed business. He was in there and kept the wine business going until he passed away. When he passed away his brother-in-law, Louis Black, took over the winery, and it is still in the Black family now. Hollis Black was the son of Louis Black and he operated it for a number of years. Of course, he had an accident in Texas on the way to visit his son, him and his wife both got killed in that accident.
- Vercelli: Was that the winery on the River Road east of the town of Cloverdale?
- DeGeorge: That's right, it's on the river, oh and it is about three miles out of Cloverdale.
- Vercelli: Are you familiar with Tay Sink, the Sink Winery, it was his uncle Walter Sink?
- DeGeorge: I know Walter Sink operated that winery for a number of years, Tay did operate it for a little while after he [Walter] passed away, but it didn't operate for very long.
- Vercelli: We had also mentioned Rosa Lotti, would you tell me about Rosa Lotti that had a winery on Hwy 128?
- DeGeorge: Lotti, they had a winery on 128 about 8 miles out of town here, just above the Gianoli Ranch, on the top up there. They had a small winery up there and they operated it for a number of years. I don't know just when they gave it up.
- Vercelli: She operated before Prohibition, I do know that she operated after Prohibition, I visited the place, I have a vague recollection. She was a very kind woman and being that she lived up on a hill, I remember that there was always venison on her table. I remember that when we wanted a government inspector, we would also call Rosa to see who was visiting her. Because they all went up for polenta and mushrooms and venison.
- DeGeorge: That I can understand. Because I've had some of that myself. [chuckles]
- Vercelli: How about the Mazzinis (Ceasar) ...?
- DeGeorge: The Mazzinis were on the same road, but they were on the opposite side of the road, they were on the west side of the road, where the Lotti's were on the east side of the road. The Mazzinis used to take grapes from the outside, they had quite

a few acres of their own but they would take grapes in from the outside.

Vercelli: Could you describe the Mazzini Ranch...?

DeGeorge: There was not much level land on there, because I worked on that vineyard and I know. It's pretty steep in places, sometimes I wondered how they worked it up there, it is a very small part that's on flat land.

Vercelli: Does the name Ratto ring a bell?

DeGeorge: Yes, Steve Ratto had a winery up on Pine Mountain, way up high. He used to have dark grapes, and white grapes also. He used to make a wonderful white wine up there that we enjoyed, it was really good. That was a wine that was not touched up with different chemicals or anything else, it was the real thing that came out of the vineyard, out of the ground. Natural sediment, no filtration outside of that. It was really a beautiful glass of wine.

Vercelli: I want to thank you for confirming that. I can remember that white wine, he didn't make very much of it, it could have been a 1000 or 1200 or 1500 gallons. I don't remember if it was from an Aleatico grape or a Muscat, it was a very strong flavor wine.

DeGeorge: It had the Muscat flavor so it must have been the Muscatel type of grape.

I used to go up there with my folks, with my dad, we used to graft their vineyard up there. So I know the vineyards he had up there. It was quite—up on the hillside, it was not down on the level or on the flat land, but it produced good grapes.

Vercelli: ...You mentioned two vineyards on which you worked at, did you work on other vineyards in the area?

DeGeorge: Yes, grafting vineyard—I worked on a lot of them. I worked on the ranch over here, Shirley Black was the foreman of it at the time over at the McLaughlin's place, and we grafted thousands of vines out there one summer.

Vercelli: The Warm Springs Ranch?

DeGeorge: Yes, going out there.

Vercelli: Who owned it at the time?

DeGeorge: I don't know if it was McLaughlin or who owned it.

- Vercelli: That must have been after Prohibition—because McLaughlin came in after 1933.
- DeGeorge: It was after Prohibition, and they had vineyard all over that place. We worked for quite a long time up there, five or six of us were doing grafting.
- Vercelli: I know that Dorsey used to sell his grapes for a while to Italian Swiss then I think some went to Korbel, I do know that he had large tonnage, several hundred tons.
- DeGeorge: He did, he got quite a bit of good sun, good ground and they got good tonnage per acre.
- Vercelli: Did you know the neighboring ranch? Did they have grapes on the Matthew Ranch, which was a neighbor of Dorsey McLaughlin's Warm Springs Ranch?
- DeGeorge: I don't recall of any other grape ranch up there.
- Vercelli: One more fellow that we had spoken of a little while ago, and that was Carl Haele...
- DeGeorge: Carl Haele, I know that he had the winery right here in town you might say was, right in back of where the high school is now, in those foothills. I don't know just when he started it or when he give up the winery, but I know he operated a winery there.
- Vercelli: He operated for a short time after Prohibition for a short period of time, Frank, because I had the pleasure of visiting there.
- Another name pops up, a name that is dear to me and that is Parducci....
- DeGeorge: Aldolf Parducci had a winery on McCray Road up here in Preston. It was right there where that lumber mill is now. He was there for quite a while and finally he quit there, he sold out and then he went to Ukiah and started the winery business up there, and he had quite a successful business up in Ukiah.
- Vercelli: He sold out in 1927, during the period of Prohibition, do you know if he operated before Prohibition?
- DeGeorge: I think that he operated a little bit before then, yes.
- Vercelli: Does the name Caruso or Imperialé, when you mentioned Preston those names came into being, do they mean anything to you?

- DeGeorge: Caruso does not ring a bell, but Imperialé does. They come out here and they went on the Crocker Ranch, they leased the Crocker Ranch for a good many years. They used to haul their grapes to Seghesio, because Seghesio was making wine and they were taking in outsiders. They run that for a good many years—on a lease basis. Then they bought that property, the Imperialés did.
- Vercelli: They bought the Crocker property?
- DeGeorge: ...Yes, they bought the Crocker property, then they sold part of it and kept part of it... Then they bought another ranch across the river over here in the flat lands. They kept that for a number of years.
- Vercelli: How about the name Ziller, George Ziller...?
- DeGeorge: Well, Ziller was over on the Dutcher Creek Road and he had a winery going. I don't know much about him—when they started or when they quit producing.
- Vercelli: ...How about Furber?
- DeGeorge: Furber (William) had a winery, I'll tell you, just to the south of town. But I don't know when they started or when they gave that up. But I do know that they were in the wine business in that particular place.
- Vercelli: Can you think of anyone else that comes to mind that might be of interest Frank?
- DeGeorge: Buzz Passarello had a winery just south of town here, oh, I would say four miles (knoll above Dutcher Creek Road and Highway 101). They had quite a little winery up on the little knoll there, and they operated for quite a good many years and then he sold out to the Rege family. And then Rege, old man Rege passed away a few years after that and the son took over and he's been carrying it on. Now I understand that he too has sold the place out.
- Vercelli: Yes, they sold to some people out of the Bay area, one is a psychiatrist and I don't know who the others are, professional people, and they changed the name to LeBay Cellars.
- Does the name DeMarantonio mean anything to you?
- DeGeorge: Yes, DeMarantonio had a ranch just south of Passarello's place down there. I don't recall of them having a winery.
- Vercelli: They had a winery, I don't know how long they operated, because the walls of the winery are still there.

DeGeorge: That's right, now I recall they have the big Boucher sign on the bottom part of the foundation that remains over there. [A large concrete structure built into the hill at Theresa Road and Dutcher Creek, "Frenchy" Boucher ran a recreation resort back of this location, Mrs. Boucher is a DeMarantonio.]

Vercelli: They were neighbors of Feliciano Vadon. The DeMarantonios are godfathers to the Sciarra in San Francisco and I knew them. In fact, Domenico Sciarra used to rear goats and I was reared on goat milk. That's why I'm always bucking like a goat [chuckles]...

Let me hear from you regarding the Vadons?

DeGeorge: The Vadons had a winery just south of Cloverdale and then they also went into bottling business. They were also producing for a time, sparkling wines.

Vercelli: ...You mentioned the Ferraris, I do know that they had a large family, and I would like to know something of their family. I do know that they were Swiss.

DeGeorge: Yes, they were paisani to me too, because I'm Swiss too. They had the ranch up there just east of the highway up on the hill up there. They had a little winery up there. And they operated for quite some time. Then when the Passarellos went away, and some passed on, being related to them, they took over the Perazzo Winery and they operated that for quite a number of years. They gave it up a number of years ago, it was after Prohibition that they gave it up.

Vercelli: Now you mention Perazzo, Passarello was it? There were two different—

DeGeorge: There were two different families, the ranches adjoined each other.

Vercelli: But Perazzo had a winery as well as a vineyard?

DeGeorge: That's right. It was the winery the Rege had taken over, the Rege place, the Passarello.

Vercelli: Where was that to Antonio Zanzi's winery?

DeGeorge: It was north.

End of Side One

Vercelli: ... The last winery that you mentioned was the Meineri, that it was south of Asti and north of Tony Zanzi. Would that put him in line with the Wittershine Ranch? Was that the name

of the one that had the two stone pillars and the wrought iron gate?

DeGeorge: Yes. The Meineri winery (called Virginia Winery established 1896) was north of the Wittershine Ranch, and Zanzi was south of Wittershine. So Wittershine was in between those two places. The Meineri Winery was about two miles south of Asti, it was right by the railroad tracks. It was not up by the highway. And Zanzi was also by the railroad tracks, further down the line.

Vercelli: When you spoke of Zanzi, the thought occurred to me, how about the Brignoli family, what do you know of them? They had a winery in 1934. They operated in '34 or '35, and I'm sure they must have had it prior to Prohibition, because I'm sure they didn't build the winery at the last minute. I know the Brignolis had three daughters and one boy. And the youngest daughter, Josephine used to play the organ in the chapel at Asti, that's how I know a little about the Brignolis.

DeGeorge: I remember them well.

Vercelli: But you don't remember if they had a winery before Prohibition?

I'm going to talk to Josephine, I've made an appointment to see her soon.

DeGeorge: I can't recall that, I know that they had something there, I can't recall what.

Vercelli: Tell me what you remember of the Seghesio family.

DeGeorge: I don't remember too much about the Seghesio family. I know they had a winery there, and it was quite extensive in the wine business. They did a lot of making wine, besides their own, taking in [grapes] from the outside.

I understand now, that they are doing all their wine business in the City of Healdsburg, where they have their main winery down there. [Grove Street] The local winery here at Chianti, I don't know if they have any wine in it at the present time. But they are not crushing there anymore.

Vercelli: Yes, I know that they have quit crushing, they have kind of curtailed their operation, and they are renting out the operation at Chianti Station, they are renting out the tanks for storage space.

Frank, you mentioned the name Mazzoni. Do you want to tell me what you know of it?

- DeGeorge: I don't know an awfully lot. I know that they had a winery there (Chianti Road south of Seghesio). They made wine and they also bottled some wine, but not to any great extent.
- Vercelli: Do you think that they operated prior to Prohibition?
- DeGeorge: As far as I know they did. They've been there for quite some time.
- Vercelli: You mentioned Bandiera. What do you know of Emil Bandiera?
- DeGeorge: Emil Bandiera, he went into the wine business right after Prohibition, I believe it was. I don't believe he had any winery before that, maybe he did, but I can't recall of it before. He was close to town here, and he had quite the spread of vineyard there, and he made up his own wine there. And now there is no more farming there. It is all houses, nice big expensive homes, lots of them.
- Vercelli: Tell me about Pacific Vineyards, you have the name (Harold) Bolla written on a piece of paper, what were your experiences with Bolla.
- DeGeorge: Pacific Vineyards (just south of Geyser Peak Winery) I didn't have too much experience with him. But when Bolla came in (circa 1935) and he took over, he was going to do wonders there. He got some of the wineries up here to send their wines down there to process and one thing and the other. And what happened is not nice to say, because we got stuck. We never got a penny for the wines we took down to that place.
- Vercelli: Do you have any recollections of who was in that building before Bolla? I had been told that there was a partnership by the name of Larsen, Scatena and Perelli-Minetti. Does that ring a bell with you?
- DeGeorge: Those names are very familiar to me. But I don't know too much about them. I do know that we got stuck with some wine when Bolla took over. [Chuckles]
- Vercelli: Frank, I forgot to ask you the first name of your father.
- DeGeorge: My father's first name was Elvezio, in the English language it is Elvis.
- Vercelli: How do you spell Elvezio? It sounds like the "old one", el veccio.
- DeGeorge: E-l-v-e-z-i-o.

- Vercelli: That's very interesting, it's the first time I've heard that we have the counter part of Elvis in Italian.
- DeGeorge: On the federal reports he generally used Elvis.
- Vercelli: We have before us a Federal report form entitled U.S. Internal Revenue Service Form 702, revised October 1924. Do you object if I take this home and make a photocopy and then return it to you? This is the only piece of evidence I have seen of form reporting during the Prohibition era.
- DeGeorge: No objection, help yourself and do the best you can with it.
- Vercelli: Would you repeat what you said a second ago Frank.*
- DeGeorge: I have a map of Sonoma County that lists all the ranches in the county and I checked the borders of ranches that I know, and it's made right to the point. One interesting point, on our ranch up on the hill it comes to a point, it makes a V-shape, a narrow V-shape. And if a cow or a horse got in there, the only way they can get out, is to back out. So I checked that, and on the map it shows that little spot. So I know that that map is authentic. The map was made in 1928.

End of tape.

*During oral histories the recorder may be turned off for periods of time the speakers want to talk "off the record."

Introduction Remarks on Frank DeGeorge

It was my good fortune to have met Frank DeGeorge in 1954 upon my return to the Italian Swiss Colony Winery at Asti. Frank was a key employee in preparing wines for bottling; in addition, he was the Union Steward for the Teamster's Union who had a labor contract with the Italian Swiss Colony. Frank represented his constituents very well. As a member of the labor-management committee he never lost track that the welfare of the company preceded the demands of the Union.

Frank retired from the Italian Swiss Colony after serving more than forty years. He was very knowledgeable of the history of the area in and around Cloverdale.

Joseph Vercelli

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